EMIGRATION SERIES NO. 3.

INDIAN EMIGRANT

ON

CEYLON ESTATES

A WHITE-WASHING COMMISSION

A Criticism

BY

Karumuttu Thiagaraja Chettiar.

Presented to

Hon'ble Mr. K. Chidambaranatha Mudliar Ad

(1982)

With best compliments of the

author

FOREWORD.

This criticism, dealing with a report on the condition of Indian Labourers on the Estates in Ceylon by N. E. Marjoribanks Esq., I. C. S., and the Hon'ble Khan Bahadur A. K. G. Ahamad Tambi Marikkayar, Sahib Bahadur, has already appeared in the Indian and the Ceylon Press. The "Madras Mail", the "Times of Ceylon" and the "Ceylon Observer", who resented my independent inquiry, have neither published this criticism nor have they remarked on it. I am afraid that in this case it is not true that 'silence gives consent'.

Athikkadu Thekkur,
Ramnad District.
August 1917.

Karumuttu Thiagaraja.

A White-Washing Commission.*

1. *Suppression of Facts.*

1. Introductory.—The Commission to enquire into the methods of recruiting and conditions of Indian labour on the estates in Ceylon and Malaya, sent in its report last February. Few perhaps have taken care to study it. In doing so, these can hardly have not felt the painful impression that the Commission has palliated defects rather than pointed them out.

2. Notes of Evidence Absent.—A report, such as this is expected to be, ought to furnish us with notes of evidence taken on the spot, which form the basis of conclusions arrived at by the trusted Commissioners. But such notes of evidence as one finds in carefully drawn up reports, are not forthcoming. A striking contrast is that whereas we have many pages of statistics drawn from a variety of sources, there is no record of evidence drawn from the lips of coolies—no questions put by the Commissioners to the poor labourers, and no answers to them— to bear out the general statements set down in this report.

* This criticism has already appeared in the press.

3. Ceylon Section.—I am dealing only with this portion of the report.

4. Only Six Estates Visited.—We should have expected the deputed enquirers to visit a large number of estates in order to pass a fair and true judgment upon them; it is dangerous to generalise from a few particular cases. But these Commissioners confess (paragraph 1) to having examined but a few estates. There are about 2000, estates in all in Ceylon; but they have visited only 6! To visit 6 estates, perhaps the 17 days spent in Ceylon by one Commissioner and 22 days by the other Commissioner might have sufficed; but they were content to give no more time than this when the hard and important task was committed to them by the Madras Government of scrutinising the condition of things in an island containing about 2,000 estates.

5. Recruiting.—Only one Commissioner, the Hon'ble Khan Bahadur Ahmad Tambi Marakkayar was deputed to consider (para. 1) how the recruiting was done; while the other, Mr. Marjoribanks, remained in Colombo "getting statistical and other information." To do fair justice to the task entrusted to them, we should not have supposed that the Commissioners would have thought of saving time by inadequate work, but would have conjointly instituted enquiries regarding the methods of professional recruiters, and allotted sufficient time to it. It was very necessary

that in such an important question as recruiting, both Commissioners should have made special enquiries. Let us see how Mr. Marakkayar has done his work. Here the report, we should have imagined, would be at its very best. It tells us (para. 18) that the *Kangany* defrauds the labourer recruited, by paying him less than he is entitled to, say Rs. 10 instead of Rs. 30. This is a very great evil indeed. But is it all? Is it likely that the rogue who thus defrauds the labourers recruited, does not also recruit them under false pretences? Now, there was a very general complaint in the press that workmen were seduced from India to Ceylon under false pretences. But the Commissioners, who ought to have known what the general complaint and grievance was, should have made a point of investigating the matter. In this respect one looked forward to a more faithful accomplishment of duty. They do not tell us whether the charge brought against the recruitment is true or false.

6. **Wages.**—We may next take up the question of wages and see how far the Commissioners have acquitted themselves of their charge. Compare their report with my own observation:—

Wages of	According to	
	Commission's Report (para. 36)	My Observation (para. 4)*
1. Pruners	40 to 45 cents†	40 cents
2. Pluckers	25 ,, 30 ,,	25 ,,
3. Factory labourers	50 ,, 60 ,,	40 ,,

The difference between the figures is striking. Nor is this all. Pruners have higher wages, it is true, but only at certain seasons of the year when there is work for them, and not all through the year. The rates I have set down are the standard wages given all over Ceylon estates. Apart from the fact that the wages given to pruners and factory labourers are not nearly so high as those stated by the Commission, and that pruners are given higher wages only when there is pruning possible at certain seasons of the year—pruners and factory labourers are the few, and the non-pruners and non-factory labourers are the many, and *these get only 33 cents a day.* This important fact finds no place in the Commission's Report. Can we overlook this serious omission? If we are to consider whether the pay is sufficient, we must consider not the few but the many, not what goes on only a few months of the year, but what is general all through the year.

* The number refers to a paragraph in my report dated February last.

† 100 cents make one rupee.

7. Cost of Living.—Is the cost of living cheaper in Ceylon than in India? If we are to rely upon the Commissioners (v. para. 39) as they have relied upon *one* Superintendent of "25 years' experience" it is as cheap to live in Ceylon as in India, given that money bears the same value in both countries. But living is much cheaper in India than in Ceylon. So that if one had the same pay it would be better for him to live in India. Well then, are we to base ourselves upon the statement of one Superintendent who tells us that 6 rupees a month is enough to live in Ceylon? My investigation, made not before one Superintendent (Superintendents are not able to tell of the expenses of a cooly's kitchen) but before coolies who have to buy provisions week after week from the shopkeeper, leads me to the conclusion (v. my report para. 5) that a man needs not less than Rs. 8 and as. 10 a month to enjoy the bare necessaries of life. *Kanganies* themselves, who are better able to speak of this matter than a Superintendent, bear out my statement. Mr. A. L. Crossman, Police Magistrate, Ratnapura, when giving evidence before a Commission appointed in 1916 by the Ceylon Government to inquire into the condition of Indian labourers in the Province of Sabaragamuwa, states that his own investigation shows that a cooly ordinarily requires a little over Rs. 4 in addition to the rice allowance which amounts to about Rs. 5—making the total more than 9 rupees a month.

8. Coolies to Be Fed Like Prisoners!—A curious remark is made in the report (para. 39) after the statement about Rs. 6 as the amount required for a cooly to live decently in Ceylon. Is it not strange to speak of prisoners in jail being fed on 73 rupees per head per annum *i. e.*, 6. 1. 4 a month? Are coolies to be fed like prisoners? They may as well go and get fed in jail where they will not be deliberately over-worked as they are on the estate, which we shall show later on.

9. Should the Cooly Emigrate?— It thus appears at least that the wages in India and in Ceylon are nearly the same, but as the cost of living is dearer in Ceylon than in India, it is better for the provident cooly to stay at home. But what makes it still more advantageous for him is that though the wages per day in theory is the same in both fields of labour, the emigrant can practically earn less in Ceylon than in India, as the evidence recorded by the Sabaragamuwa Commission shows. The state of affairs in one province is not very different from that in the others. This is by the way. Mr. R. N. Thaine, Government Agent,* Sabaragamuwa, in a report to the Ceylon Government on the hardships of coolies writes:—

"As regards the complaint that the coolies never had enough money or wages to enable them to purchase sundries, &c., it is a fact that in the majority of cases coolies only receive as their wages at the end of the month small sums varying between 75 cents and Rs. 3."

*Corresponding to a District Collector.

Moreover, some opinions incidentally expressed in the present report, too, strengthen our case; such as (para. 39):—

"Our impression is that while the average labourer and his family make enough to feed and clothe themselves quite as well, if not better, than in India, they ordinarily do not accumulate appreciable sums as savings."

Now then, does not the cooly leave his home because he expects something better than he can find by staying in India? If it is not so, why should the cooly emigrate at all?

10. Slavery.—There is another important fact that has to be considered immediately after the point just mentioned. It is impossible for a cooly to start life on Ceylon estates without a debt. The report very honestly admits this evil. It says (para. 14):—

"This sum [money advanced when recruiting] together with the amount of the emigrant's travelling expenses and food till he reaches the estate in Ceylon forms the debt with which each labourer starts life in Ceylon."

Not only does "the state of indebtedness" act "as a deterrent to thrift and industry" as the Commission says, but it soon reduces the cooly to a state of veritable slavery. The report indirectly admits this fact. For it tells us in all fairness (para. 27):—

"Many estates early realised that the labourers were at the mercy of the kanganies in the matter of their indebtedness."

And in another place (para. 34):—

> "The labourer thus is free to leave his employer at a month's notice, or at any time for reasonable cause. But under the kangany system described above, whereunder the labourer is a kangany's debtor, and the latter in his turn indebted to the estate, taken in conjunction with the conservatism of the Tamil labourer, it is not surprising that the labourer does not realise his legal position. That the kangany considers that he has some sort of proprietory right in the labourer and that the labourer accepts this position is abundantly clear from the manner in which the labourer is, and allows himself to be, taken from employer to employer by his kangany and accepts the increasing load of debt thrust on him in the process."

The report continues to give truthful testimony (para. 35):—

> "Thus a labourer who has not the capacity or opportunity to rise to the position of a kangany or sub-kangany, remains on an estate under a debt which rarely diminishes but often increases."

For the poorly paid cooly, frightfully defrauded by the *Kangany* and finding it difficult to keep soul and body together, to repay the heavy "debt" is certainly out of the question; and to resort to law to seek freedom, he is too ignorant, nor has he got the means and facilities. So some try to escape the heavy burden of debt and slavery by "bolting." The Commission readily admits that "In 1915 the number of 'bolters' from federated estates was 8,894", a fact that certainly does not speak highly of the contentment of coolies. As a result, most, if not all, die like slaves.

And yet Ceylon emigration is '*free*', not 'indentured'!

11. Coolies Are Overworked.— The report says nothing of the *10 continuous hours of work a day,* from 6 a. m., to 4 p. m., without break. The Superintendents honestly admit this condition of affairs. The evidence recorded in the Sabaragamuwa Report too bears out this fact. Coolies in India do not work for more than 7 or 8 hours at the utmost a day, and that, not without a break of 2 hours. Important as this matter is, the Commission does not appear to have considered the question.

12. Starvation of Coolies.—The law binds the estate to treat and nurse the coolies during illness. But the estates neglect them. "The first point which I would emphasize is the scandalous neglect with which the sick coolies ... have been treated" are the pathetic words of the judgment in P. C. 28,196 of 1914 of Ratnapura. Mr. A. P. Boon, District Judge, writes (January 1914):—

> "40 coolies started prostrating themselves in front of us and saying they were starving ... The coolies were obviously being starved. Many of them ... were fit only for hospital ... He [Dr. Perera], too, told me that from all sides he was hearing similar reports ... that they were unable to resist such diseases [hook-worm] owing to being under-fed ... I was also told that 4 deaths had occurred ... from starvation ... from what I saw I can believe it."

Dr. Lunn, Inspecting Medical Officer, refers to a number of half-starved coolies, in his report dated January 1914. The Sabaragamuwa Commission finds such allegations wholly true; not to speak of my

appalling experience. I must here reiterate that the conditions are not very different comparing one province with another. Startling as this revelation of the existing state of things is, the Commission ignores the question and passes over the matter in silence.

13. Judicial and Extrajudicial Administration: Acts of Injustice and Atrocity.— We expected the Commissiou to strongly condemn the so-called law which sentences to rigorous imprisonment those coolies who fail to work or who leave the estate without the permission of the Superintendants; why it even sentences those who harbour the coolies merely out of compassion. But the commission is, unfortunately, silent upon this point.

Nevertheless, the report truly admits (para. 44.):-

> "Most estates appear to inflict small fines for petty neglects or bad work. Such fines seem however to be illegal having regard to the provision of section 6 of Ordinrnce 13 of 1889."

Acknowledging as the Commission does, on the one hand, that the small fines imposed upon coolies are frequent, and, on the other, that they are illegal, it does not, however, lay much stress upon the point, or suggest any remedies against an evil which may appear small to the master but is very hard on the cooly. If most estates are acknowledged to have committed positive acts of injustice of this kind in small matters, one may not claim that they are not immune from the propensity to commit acts of greater injustice.

The report says (para. 31):—

"Large increrse in a labourer's account in the past were noticeable on account of the relatives who had died or absconded, the amounts of their debts being added to that of the family or sometimes, even of the gang."

Note the apologetic expression "in the past"! Probably this evil was not noticed at the time the Commission visited the estates. Hence the expression "in the past." This grave illegality not only existed "in the past," but exists even at present. A debt of this nature is certainly not recoverable in any Court of Law in Ceylon or in India. Alas! the illiterate cooly does not understand his legal position.

The Commission states in passing (para. 44):—

"Corporal punishment is recognised to be illegal and is certainly not common or usual though of course there are bad masters in the island as well as bad servants."

The Commissioners, however, do not set in relief the fact that there are atrocities of a serious nature committed on the estates from time to time. There is, at all events, need of emphasing the point if the object of the Commission is to bring help to the poor cooly from high quarters, seeing that he cannot do anything himself, while his rich and influential master can take the law into his own hands and has the means to escape the punishment of the Court.

I cite three instances from the well-known *Ceylonese:*

(i) "According to Muniyamma, an eye witness, the accused [an estate watchman] came up with a gun to the cooly lines, and asked the deceased, among others, why she

was not at work. The woman replied she would go to work the next day. The accused then shot her dead, and ran off, but was soon secured by some coolies and handed over to the authorities. Karupai, Soccala Naran and Mariamma, all of them eye witness, told much the same story. ... The jury brought in a verdict of not guilty of murder, but guilty of a rash and negligent act. His Lordship pointed out ... that the act could not have been both rash and negligent, and ... the panel submitted ... a verdict of guilty of a rash act. His Lordship ... imposed a penalty of one hundred rupees." (January 30th, 1917.)

(ii) "A planter was convicted of having caused grievous hurt to a cooly in his employ. That was a very serious offence according to our Law. But the Magistrate who convicted the planter shocked the public conscience by fining him ten rupees and detaining him at the Bar till the rising of the Court." (February 6th, 1917.)

(iii) "The accused [a planter] is reported to have said that he told the complainant, the Kangany on his estate ... 'to go on his hands and knees.' And by way of speeding the parting guest the accused called him a 'nalla madu.' ... The accused ordered the complainant to kneel down. If he had refused ... accused is reported to have stated that 'he would have killed him' ... The Magistrate considered the accused 'technically guilty' of wrongful restraint, and fined him ten rupees. (April 25th, 1917.)

May cases of such revolting natures be passed over in silence?

The report tells us (para. 41):—

"An employer has no power of arrest in respect to a servant who absconds or rather offends."

But the estates employ watchmen and supply them with arms to prevent coolies from leaving the estate. Nay more, the estates advertise offering rewards for the arrest of "bolted" coolies, and males and females

are arrested without Court warrants by private individuals.

Instances like these are not to be quietly ignored by an impartial Commission, but rather to be commented upon.

The Commission remarks with reference to the year 1915 (para. 43.):—

> "The total number of cases against labourers (44,09) and against employers (26) is very small in comparison with the size of the labour force (about 400,000 workers) and the number of employers (over 2,000)."

If the Commission had considered the question whether coolies enjoy sufficient facility for proceeding to Court to lodge complaints, it would not have come to such a satisfactory conclusion.

14. Hardships at Mandapam.—The report says nothing of the complaint in the Quarantine Camp at Mandapam—whether the coolies are well-fed, properly housed or not. The Commissioners instead of investigating and reporting on the complaints, give us (para. 20) a bare description of the official version.

15. Some Contrast.—A remarkable contrast with the grave omissions is the space given (para. 4 to 12) to the strength and distribution of the labour force and its sufficiency to meet the demand; as if the poor slaves could take advantage of the competition for labour. Three pages are devoted to it out of 22

pages, not counting the statistics. Again one page is allotted (para. 55) to the description of hook-worm disease besides an extract of 3 pages (pp. 76 to 78) in the appendix. Had Lord Pentland's Government wanted information of this nature it would have easily got it from one of the Doctors in Madras. It surely has not sent out Commissioners to get information available in Madras.

It is to be concluded, from a consideration of the foregoing remarks, that the Commissioners have taken a hasty view of things in Ceylon and that a more mature judgment would have altered greatly not a small number of their statements; or is this report to be taken in the light of an apology for the planting interest as opposed to labour interest?

So much for *suppressio veri.* Tomorrow we shall consider some statements made in the official account.

Athikadu Thekkur,
Ramnad District,
August 22nd 1917.

KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJA.

A White-Washing Commission.

II. Mistaken in Portraying Facts.

Today I undertake to show that even such facts as are recorded in Messrs. Marakkayar and Marjoribanks' Report are not quite correct.

16. Federation.—The report says (para. 28):—"Only some 75 per cent of the estates in Ceylon joined this Federation"; whereas up to April 1915 only 853 estates had joined it—it must be, I reckon, about 42 per cent. Since 1915, the number must be on the decrease. For it worked so badly that it has of late been abolished.

The report states (para. 31):—"The debts of deceased labourers are now written off by all federated estates." This is by no means a matter of course. Compare the rule of the Federation, which I quote:—

"Rule 28. On the certified death of any registered cooly (not Kangany) his or her individual debt not exceeding Rs. 50/- shall be written off against the Estate and the remainder of the debt shall be debited to the Kangany or written off at the discretion of the Agents or Proprietors on the recommendation of the Superintendent."

Needless to say that seldom is a recommendation of this nature made or accepted. It is rarely that a cooly owes the estate anything less than Rs. 75, and the balance which the *Kangany* has to meet is without exception recovered from the cooly's family.

Do not the above statements of the Commission disclose some lack of seriousness in the writing?

17. Island Free from Foul Diseases.—The report says (para 62):—

"Cases of plague, cholera and small-pox are rare amongst the estate population. In fact, these diseases are not prevalent in the island".

But if it is true that "these diseases are not prevalent in the island" how could the Chairman at the meeting of the Colombo Municipal Council on the 25th May last, announce 169 cases of plague in the year as compared to 69 in 1916 and to 33 in 1915?

18. Housing and Sanitary Conditions.—The report says (para. 45) that housing and sanitary conditions are quite satisfactory. My experience is that it is not so. Ventilation has not been specially cared for. More than four persons occupy a room of 12 feet by 10 feet. Dr. Lunn, Inspecting Medical Officer in the Civil Department, refers in his report to the insanitary state of certain lines he visited. The Sabaragamuwa Commission says that it visited a large number of estates in the Ratnapura District and "many did not come up to the standard of sanitation." Dr. T. S. Nair, Assistant District Medical Officer,

when giving evidence before the same Commission, says the coolies "are kept too over crowded." "Look at this picture and on that!"

19. Gifts after Chidbirth.—The law requires the estate to bear all expenses during the month after confinement. The report, therefore, says (para. 57) :—"The general practice is to give the mother Rs. 2. and half a bushel of rice." In my investigation, however, I found that this Rs. 2 is debited to her account; and the Sabaragamuwa Report corroborates this fact. It says:—

"The practice of debiting the woman or her husband with the cash advance given to her after confinement, appears to us to be contrary to the Law."

20. Gifts to Children.—The law also urges on the estate to see that children under the age of one year receive proper care and nourishment. So, the report says (para. 57) :—

"Some estates give all non-working (i.e. non-earning) children one meal a day free at four in the afternoon. On other estates children not yet of an age to do any work are mustered once a month and each mother is given 1/8 bushel of rice. On some estates, a mother is given a bonus (Rs. 5 or more) if her child lives to be one year old."

When speaking of "some estates", "other estates" and again "some estates" in the above quotation, it is not very clear whether the Commissioners mean to give an account of all the estates, or a few. I do not think even a few estates do what the Commission says. I did not hear of any of these facts

during my investigation. Nor is there any record of any of them in the Sabaragamuwa Report. Is this the practice? Or is it a regulation that remains a dead letter?

21. Statistics Misleading.—The Commission says (para. 6):—

"A large proportion (about 40 per cent) of the labourers going to Ceylon through the Labour Commission, during the last few years is composed of persons who have been in the island before."

Now what would be the reader's impression after his perusal of this statement? He would be tempted to smile at those speaking of the ill-treatment of the coolies. For how could the coolies think of returning if they were ill-treated? What is the fact? Do they return willingly? This is what we should consider. Circumstances force them to return. They place a substantial security before leaving, without which they cannot go from the estate. Mr. A. L. Crossman, when giving evidence before the Sabaragamuwa Commission says:—

"In the case of Tamils, when one is allowed to go someone else of the family is detained. I remember one case, 28,705 in which Mr. Berry, of Delwella, stated with regard to a small gang, consisting of a husband, wife, and two children, that he would not allow all the gang to go to India together."

When a man goes back to India, leaving a wife and children behind, is it surprising that he returns? Can we conclude that he is drawn back to Ceylon by

love of the estate and the *Kangany*? From the statement quoted above, made by the Commission Report, it will appear that the Commissioners have been misled into the insinuation that the labourer returns to Ceylon because he loves to do so. And the reader is apt to conclude the same, whereas the labourer returns because he is morally compelled.

22. Repatriation.—

> "Some labourers, no doubt, return to India permanently after ... finding the condition unsuitable."

So says the Commission (para. 6). Bnt can those who are said to find the conditions unsuitable return to India permanently? Compare that remark with what the report says by the way (para. 65) and see whether it is easy for the cooly to return to India:—

> "The debt which practically every labourer owes his kangany or his estate prevents him leaving except for short visits to India with the leave of his employer or except by 'bolting'."

Now, not some, as the Commission says, but the vast majority of the coolies find the condition unsuitable, as the unscrupulous *Kangany* recruits them only under false pretences. Can they all or even some of them return to settle down in India? It is impossible, except in very rare cases, as they cannot repay their debts to the estate. Quite recently, as late as February 28th last, "Devadass" bore testimony, not without proofs, in the columns of the popular "Hindu", how a mechanic was enticed away

to Ceylon and forced to do cooly work; how and with what difficulty he managed to get home after his relatives in India had paid Rs. 50—12—0 to the Labour Commission at Trichinopoly for his passage. Again, *all* the coolies examined by the Sabaragamuwa Commission complained that the conditions are absolutely different from what they expected them to be and begged the Commission to send them home. The writers of the report are not cognisant of this.

The Commission reports (para. 65):—

"Labourers who break down in health and become unfit for work on the estate are usually sent back to India at the expense of the estate, but there is no law on the subject and no special organization to control the matter."

Note the benevolent tone "are usually sent back". When the planters do not do what they should do according to law, (see paras. 12, 13 and 20 of the present article) is it at all likely that they practise philanthropy when there is no law or special organisation to control the matter?

Mr. Fritz Kunz, Principal of Ananda College, Colombo, in the course of a heartrending description of "A victim to our labour system" tells us (see *Ceylonese*, February 4, 1917):

"On account of his frequent illness he was asked by the Kangany to leave the estate. It should be noted that he was not regarded as a chattel because he owed the estate nothing. He left the estate a sick man and the possessor of 25 cents in Ceylon money ... What state is Ceylon in when sick men can be cast out like dogs when

their usefulness is at an end, and turned away from the natural asylum of the sick?"

23. Sex Ratio.—The percentage of men and women among the arrivals for 61 years is 73·45, and 16·75 respectively (and children 9·80)—a fact which the Commission tries to explain away. It argues (para. 6):–

"Comparing this with the proportion of males and females among the Tamil labour force in 1911 (234,594 males and 205,708 females) it is evident that a low proportion of women among each year's immigrants does not necessarily mean a low proportion of women in the resident immigrant population."

If the proportion was somewhat fair in 1911 does it necessarily mean that it will be so in the following years as well, especially, too, when the percentage of women in the subsequent years is very poor.

The Commission observes (para. 6):—

"The men return after a time and go back again with their women folk in many cases thus getting counted twice over."

But compare this with what the same Commission says (para. 65.):—

"Leave from the 'employer [to go to India] can be readily obtained by those who have settled down to family life on the state, but probably not easily by others." How then can the unmarried men return to India and get back to Ceylon with their women-folk "thus getting counted twice over"? Again do men alone return and go back "getting counted twice over"?

If we compare the *percentage* of women who arrive in Ceylon to that of women who depart from the island, we find the latter to be greater than the former. Comparatively a greater percentage of women depart than arrive. So, whereas 30,000 men and 5,000 women arrived in 1900 in Ceylon, 10,000 men and 2,500 women departed in 1901. So, if a certain number of men is counted twice over, a comparatively larger number of women is also counted twice over. Why overlook the latter fact which is obviously more conspicuous, and observe only the former which is comparatively less remarkable?

"The women more often settle in their new homes and their daughters grow up, marry and settle there too. Thus in course of time the inequality in numbers between the sexes tends to disappear,"

plead the Commission (para. 6). That the inequality has not disappeared in the course of 61 years has also not struck them nor the fact that the percentage of women arriving every year continues to be very low. The Commission do not discuss the present proportion of the sexes in the manner of the critical historian.

"...The sexes are fairly evenly matched in the Tamil labour population"

declare the Commissioners (para. 68). According to the census of 1911, the Commission says, "there were 239,111 males and 209,038 females." Even if we accept this to be quite correct for our special purpose, every seventh or eighth man has no wife. Can we then

say that "the sexes are fairly evenly matched"? In face of the fact that the proportion of women in the world is greater than that of men it is very significant and regrettable that on the Ceylon estates the proportion of men to women is roughly 7 to 6 — a very large and unsatisfactory proportion, indeed— the significance of which the Commissioners rather underrate.

> "Excepting new arrivals, the labourers live in families on the estate and there are no undesirable features due to a lack of women,"

the Commission reports (para. 68). But what about the "new arrivals"? Are these "new arrivals" above ordinary human weakness? Had the commissioners used more discretion, they would not have committed themselves to such discordant and dangerously broad statements.

24. To Sum up the Work of the Commission.—The notes of evidence required to clinch statements are conspicuous by their absence. General conclusions may be arrived at only by the examination of a fairly good proportion of particulars; but the Commission has visited only a few estates. Important as the system itself of recruiting is, it does not tell us whether it is an evil or not, in its method of working. It sets down rates of wages which on verification prove to be incorrect. Easy as it is to find out the cost of living, the Commissioners, however, have underestimated it. Does the cooly gain by going to Ceylon from India? This question is

unanswered. Again we are not told whether the emigrant retains his liberty or becomes a slave. One might think after reading the report that he is not overworked, whereas facts point quite the other way. The Commissioners speak of the law that the cooly must be fed during his illness, and are silent regarding its frequent infringenment with immunity. The law in Ceylon is extremely hard on the cooly and benevolent towards the master, and yet the Commission maintains silence on the subject. Many are the hardships of the quarantine camp, they are not dwelt upon, nor referred to. Relevent points are skipped over, and irrelevent points such as the supply of coolies meeting the demand are dilated upon. The debts of deceased labourers are not entirely written off by Federated estates. The Federation has unfortunately, been abolished since. Rare though plague is supposed to be in the report under review, there were according to tne Municipal Chairman's statement 169 victims to it in 1917. Its notion of sanitation must narrow, if a house 12 feet by 10 feet for four coolies with their children, is considered a satisfactory condition. Whatever it may say of gifts to women after childbirth and to children, there is no evidence that they are given to children and that the practice as regards women is contrary to law. The statistics are presented to us in such a manner that one is apt to conclude that the cooly returns to Ceylon after his visit to India because he likes to return, which impression the Commission itself creates;

whereas a close study of the figures leads us to quite a different inference. Again it magnifies the situation of the suitableness of the conditions to the cooly, and minimises the difficulty of his being repatriated. The fact is few, if any, return, it being next to impossible for the cooly to get back to India when once he has bound himself to the *Kangany* and the estate. It does not blush to say that the proportion of the sexes which is a very important question—is "fairly evenly matched", when a scrutiny of the figures reveals to us the alarming truth that there are only 39 women to every 61 men! Can I not, therefore, be excused for calling it "A White-Washing Commission"?

Now to turn to the good side, little though it be, of the report, the Commission is very liberal in exposing the 'unscrupulous' *Kangany* and his worse methods. Another praiseworthy feature is that it refers to the "suicidal policy of issuing *tundu*" (a kind of leaving certificate mentioning the debt on payment of which he will be relived from that jail—estate)—which is the cause of the chronic debt of the forsaken cooly.

25. Conclusion.—I have dealt with a number of the flaws in the report, though not with all nor in complete detail. Even those I have indicated show, I am afraid, that Mr. Marjoribanks, who may be supposed to have written the report, has, however unintentionally, used the white-washing brush freely, and the Honourable Khan Bahadur has, with energy,

seconded his innocent efforts. The report, indeed, is meagre and not very creditable.

The public, we may conclude, was right when it anticipated from the men chosen to be Commissioners that the burden of work committed to them was above their strength. Nor has it been disappointed. Who is to blame? The Commissioners are to blame if they accepted a task to which they felt themselves unequal. The selection of gentlemen was not a happy one. Had the Government chosen more qualified men we should now be in possession of more historical facts; the sufferings of the coolies would have been made public, and called for redress from the British Government which is chivalrously striving to right wrongs.

The *Madras Mail*, the *Ceylon Times*, and especially the *Ceylon Observer* have censured me for the offence I had committed in privately investigating and reporting on the condition of the poor coolies on Ceylon estates. I consider that their remarks spring not from self-interest but from a Commission report, hastily drawn up, and rather uncritical. The Ceylon Government also seems to have suspected my motives, and instituted enquiries regarding my person and character. I have naturally incurred the displeasure of the Planting interests of Ceylon. But I regret this less than the attitude of the Government and the Editors who are expected to judge impartially and to give both sides a hearing, and especially me who am

quite disinterested in the matter and but wish wrongs to be righted. I, therefore, indulge the hope that the present review may throw light on the subject and draw the impartial Government and the Editors of those papers to the side of human suffering, and play the Samaritan to the forlorn cooly.

Athikadu Thekkur,
Ramnad District,
August 23rd 1917.

KARUMUTTU THIAGARAJA.

APPENDIX.

Opinions of the Press on the Commission.

A Perfunctory Report.

The Report on the Indian Labour Emigrating to Ceylon and Malaya prepared by Mr. N. E. Marjoribanks and the Hon'ble Khan Bahadur A.K.G. Ahmad Thambi Marakkayar, Sahib Bahadur ... ... is *a perfunctory performance of hardly any value for the purpose for which the Committee was appointed.* For all that we know, the greater portion of the compilation which has been dignified into a report, might have been written by the Committee without leaving the City of Madras. ... ... We do not propose now to re-state the statistical information given in the report of the Committee, but even such facts as are mentioned go to strengthen the case for a detailed inquiry into the system of free labour as it is being worked in Ceylon and Malaya. The frightful state of indebtedness described the other day in these columns by Mr. Thiagaraja is incidentally supported by the Committee which says that in spite of various measures taken, the average debt of a cooly is Rs. 70. ... ... What value, then, can be attached to an investigation which gives the public bare historical and

---

Headings and *italics* are mine. (Thiagaraja)

statistical information and refrains form telling the Government which appointed it what further measures are necessary to improve the conditions of Indian labourers and what precautions should be taken in respect of recruitment? The Committee appears almost to think that there is not much to complain about in regard to either of these matters. We think that this conclusion is wrong; there is a clear evidence that matters are very grave and even in the report there are certain facts mentioned which lend support to this view. *But the public cannot rely on this document for an impartial, accurate and detailed account of the condition of Indian labour in Ceylon and Malaya,* and we have to look forward to the unofficial deputation ... ... for a fair and full description and for recommendations for improving the system. In the meanwhile, we must ask the Madras Government and the Government of India not to rely very much on the compilation which has now been published. (*Hindu,* March 7, 1917.)

One-Sided Opinion.

It will be seen that this report is absolutely devoid of suggestions, [or] of any comments on the evidence of ill-usuage laid before the Courts, and of other serious complaints made by responsible men. Our readers will do well to compare it with that of Mr. Karumuttu Thiagaraja, published in our columns on Feb. 28th last. It might as well have been written

in their studies from the printed returns available. (*New India*, March 7, 1917.)

... ...

We wish very much that some private persons would visit Malaya, and bring us back information of a fuller character than is presented to us in these formal reports, which do not help us to estimate the real condition of the coolies employed. *That the deputation has seen that which the planters wished them to see, and no more, is obvious.* Taking the two reports together, Malaya, seems better than Ceylon. But we wonder what we should learn if we had a Mr. Karumuttu Thiagaraja to report to us about the conditions of emigration to Malaya. (*New India*, March 8, 1917.)

Begging the Question.

... ...

As we have said, as a document recording the rules and regulations in force, and the conditions of labourers as seen at first glance, the report is valuable; but those who would examine it with a view to find out the truth or otherwise of the serious allegations of oppression and mischief such as come from independent source like that of Mr. Karumuttu Thiagaraja, nothing but disappointment awaits. The Commissioners have approached the question not with the spirit of enquirers, but of learners. They have found excellent rules in the books, but they have also

found that the ignorance of the cooly enslaves him to the Kangany. *Is it or is it not a fact that the Tamil cooly in the Ceylon plantations is harshly treated?* Is it or is it not a fact that very serious instances of ill-treatment of coolies have come from the Malaya Peninsula, in fact to such an extent that the Government once notified publicly that there was no Protector of Emigrants in Malaya? We find no answer to this important question in the report of the Commissioners. It was for this answer that Indian public opinion demanded a Commission of Enquiry. If, as a result of the report, the Government would prohibit the emigration of illiterate and ignorant men who could be led like cattle by Kanganies, a real step would have been taken to satisfy the public. As it is, the Commission, whose report is placed before the public, need not have been appointed at all. (*Indian Patriot*, March 7, 1917.)

No Opinions.

Mr. Marjoribanks, I. C. S., and the Hon'ble Khan Bahadur Tambi Marakkayar ... . have now submitted their report which has been placed on the Editor's table ... ... we must say that, at a first glance, we find it disappointing. It contains a number of statements of facts, but few, if any, expressions of opinion as to whether the actual working conditions are good or bad. For example, the account of the quarantine

camp at Mandapam is a bare description of the official procedure, as follows:—

"The great majority of the labourers going to Ceylon at present are qurantined at the Ceylon Government camp at Mandapam. The quarantine is for six days. All who do not bear marks of recent vaccination are vaccinated, and all cases of contagious or inflictious diseases are not allowed to proceed. The clothes and effects of all labourers are also disinfecsted. The camp etc., etc."

It was surely not necessary to send two Commissioners to find out such facts as these. They could have been obtained in a letter form the Ceylon Government. We have heard tales of shocking discomforts in the camp, and should have expected some sort of opinion as to whether a careful personal inspection of the camp, with inquiries amongst the labourers, afforded any ground for supposing that the conditions are not as they should be, but there is no expression of opinon at all.

We have heard much, again, about punishments inflicted upon coolies for different offences, as for example about imprisonment for leaving service without due notice, and we should have expected some expression of opinion as to the general effect of the various penalties. But we find nothing but a bald statement of the penal provisions. Such information as is given might have been got from the Ceylon statue-books without going to Ceylon.

In another place we have a dissertation on the hook-worm:—"The hook-worm is a worm about half-an-inch long which attaches itself to the inner wall of the human intestine, where it sucks the blood of its host. It lives etc. etc." For this and for all that follows we could surely have gone to a medical treatise.

It is true that ninety-nine pages contain a good deal of matter that is of much interest; but very little of it is of the special sort that we should have expected from specially-appointed Commissioners. *We expected "propositions", and we find nothing but "definitions." We expected conclusions, but we have been given no more than statements of facts. We feel that we are still left in the dark as to the actuality of the "conditions of Indian labour" on estates.* (*Madras Times*, March 8, 1917.)

Contradiction and Confirmation.

We are only able to-day to deal with the Ceylon Section of the report of Messers. Marjoribanks and the Hon'ble A. K. G. Ahmed Thambi Marikayar on the conditions of free emigration to Ceylon and Malaya, chiefly because we have another independent report on the same subject by Mr. Karumuttu Thiagaraja, which also calls for notice at the same time. *Both reports* are interesting and, to a certain extent, they *confirm each other in one particular, namely as to the conditions under which this labour is recruited, the evils of the advance system, the state of chronic debt in*

which the labourers exist, and the consequent unrest and movement of labour caused by the tundu system ... ...
This last is a system suicidal to the interests of the planter .. ..
A point that critics like Mr. K. Thiagaraja and others overlook is that efforts have been made by the planters and the Ceylon Government to minimise these defects in the system of recruiting, but they have been obstructed, partly by lack of unity among the planters themselves, even among those who formed a federation to restrict advances and to limit as much as possible the burden of debt which the coolies arrive on the estates, but chiefly by the *Kanganies* and professional recruiters in South India, who benefit chiefly by this system of advances... ... ...

When, however, we come to the question of the condition and treatment of coolies on the estates, etc., we cannot help thinking that the independent enquirer, Mr. Thiagaraja, has been finding out things that he was predisposed to find, irrespective of whether they existed or not. As regards the housing and other accommodation of the labourers his criticism is wholly destructive. Against this we would put the deliberate opinion of the two special Government Commissioners: —"As far as we saw, the accommodation appeared sufficient and there was no overcrowding. ... ...
"Similarly with regard to the health of the people.

It is not much use providing medical treatment and midwives if the preference of the people are all in favour of quackery and crude obstetrics. The law in Ceylon however imposes on planters a certain responsibility in these matters, and it is only reasonable to suppose that they, in their own interests, will see to it that this law is carried out.... ... ...

In this direction and in others it is as well to remember that the special Commissioners have had at their disposal all official facts figures and reports, and the conclusions at which they arrive are much more likely to be correct than that of the independent enquirer, who, despite the best intentions in the world, gives evidence in more than one place in his report that he has been only too willing to lend a willing ear to what he has merely been told. Here, for instance, in a case in point. Dealing with the morals of the coolies Mr. Thiagaraja says:—

"The evil is that the number of women is much less than that of men." ... ...

Naturally this question was one on which the special Commissioners were deputed to enquire. Let us see what they have to say on the subject: "It will be seen from the figures quoted (proving that they have gone into the statistics carefully) that the sexes are fairly evenly matched in the Tamil labour population. Excepting new arrivals, the labourers live in families on the estate, and there are no undesiarable features due to a lack of women." Again Mr.

Thiagaraja says, on the subject of the treatment of coolies, that the relations between employers and labourers is bad, a fact that is strengthened by the great number of prosecutions before the Courts.

... ...

Apparently Messrs Marjoribanks and Marakkayar were under the same impression; because this is what they say on this subject ... ...

"We were surprised to learn the right figures, as perusal of the daily papers had given us the impression that prosecutions were far more numerous." In another place we were told that the kind of work and wages available in Ceylon are always misrepresented and that quite educated men, have bcen taken in.

... ...

The fact that educated men, or any man for that matter, finds himself in Ceylon in the alleged unenviable conditions referred to is, therefore, entirely his own fault. He can get all the advice he needs in south India, and even at the last moment he is allowed to change his mind and go home again.

... ...

We could easily go on thus selecting from Mr. Thiagaraja's report statements of this kind that have no evidence of any kind to support them, beyond an imagination too ready to see evil where none is. There are evils enough in the system of indentured emigration without necessary calls on our indignation being made by those who also oppose ordinary emigration. (*Madras Mail*, March 8, 1917.)

Criticism Awaited.

... ...

The report practically resolves itself into a close description of the labour system in operation in this island, including the methods of recruiting the labourers from Southern India, and contains little or nothing by way of criticism, though it is quite evident that the Commissioners carefully investigated all the defects or alleged defects which it contains ... ... The Commissioners content themselves with stating facts which are practically common ground with reference to all these subjects and practically abstain from criticism, though they point out the heavy indebtedness of coolies and other objectionable features of the advance system. ... ... *As already stated the report is purely informative. Criticism will probably follow later.* (*Times of Ceylon*, March 22, 1917.)

BY SAME AUTHOR

EMIGRANT DIFFICULTIES AT MANDAPAM.

OR

CEYLON QUARANTINE REGULATION DIFFICULTIES.

Tamil Sangam Power Press, Madura—17.